Kamikaze

SUMMARY

The speaker's father, a kamikaze pilot, sets off on his mission at the break of day. He has some water and a samurai sword with him in the plane. He also has a shaved head, and in his mind he repeats affirmations about his mission. He has just enough fuel to reach his target, which he intends to fly into directly, becoming a part of history in the process.

Years later, the pilot's daughter is telling her own children this story, and she imagines things from her father's perspective once he is halfway to his target. At that point, she imagines her father looking down at the sea below. The fishing boats must look like the little decorative flags as they floated on the clear, blue-green water.

The pilot sees something below the boats, moving in large curves like a giant flag being waved in a figure-eight pattern—it is a school of fish, and their silvery bodies shine whenever their bellies face up towards the sun.

The pilot's view triggers a memory from his childhood. In this memory, he is with his brothers on the beach, stacking small rocks into a pile. The brothers wait to see whose piles will stand up longest when the waves rush in—the same waves that will bring their father's fishing boat home safely.

In an aside, the daughter mentally notes that this, of course, would be her own grandfather's boat. Back in the pilot's memory, the boat comes ashore, full of mackerel, crabs, prawns, and whitebait. The pilot also remembers one occasion when his father caught a huge tuna, which was like a frightening yet exciting warrior prince.

The pilot decides not to fulfill his kamikaze mission, and returns home. When he gets back, his wife refuses to speak to him ever again. She doesn't even look him in the eye. The neighbors treat him with similar disdain, as if he does not even exist anymore. The pilot's children, including the speaker, are the only ones who continue to love him.

Soon enough, though, even they learn to ignore him too, to pretend he never came back—that he isn't their father. Now, many years later, the speaker speculates that her father must have wondered which way was the better to die—in a suicide mission or as a social outcast.

THEMES

PATRIOTISM, HONOR, AND SHAME

The poem tells the story of a Japanese suicide bomber who abandons his mission out of an implied desire to return to his loved ones—only to then be shunned by his community for doing so. The poem explores the conflict between personal and national duty, suggesting an impassible divide between individual desire and extreme patriotism (especially in a society that places great cultural importance on notions of honor). The irony of the poem is that returning to his family costs the pilot his honor, which, in turn, costs him the love of his wife and children.

Japanese kamikaze pilots during World War II were typically young men who hoped to bring honor to their families by sacrificing themselves on their country's behalf. The poem reflects the psychological pull of dying honorably with the phrase "one-way / journey into history." This describes the pilot's flight, which is "into history" both because he is going to make a significant contribution to his country *and* because he will no longer be alive once his mission is complete—he himself will have become history.

The mention of the samurai sword in the cockpit further underscores the societal connection between honor and self-sacrifice/death. This sword brings to mind seppuku, a form of ritual suicide practiced by ancient samurai in order to, broadly speaking, restore honor to themselves and their families. The pilot's head is also notably full of "powerful incantations"—mental affirmations to help him complete his deadly task and reassure himself of the noble nature of what he's doing.

But as the pilot flies over the sea, he gets a bird's-eye view of everything he'll be leaving behind. The beauty of the "green-blue translucent" water and the "silver" shoals of fish trigger the pilot's memories of his childhood. The pilot recalls playing on the beach with his brother, and fishing with his father. And these memories remind the pilot that it's not honor that gives his life meaning, but rather being with his loved ones. It's small, intimate moments with his family that grant him fulfillment, the poem suggests.

Of course, this realization stands in contrast to the kind of thinking behind the use of kamikaze pilots in the first place, which is that national duty outweighs personal desires. As such, things take a tragic turn when the pilot gets back to land. His wife and neighbors believe that, in failing to fulfill his duty, the pilot has cast shame on himself and by extension on his entire family. His wife freezes him out—denying him the very same love that motivated his decision in the first place. His neighbors won't speak to him, and, over time, even his own children effectively disown him.

This captures the way that the pilot was in an impossible situation, having to choose between dying in supposed glory or wilting away from shame. This second "way to die" is a much

slower death, and it's especially tragic because the pilot loses the very love he wanted to live for—such is the power of honor and societal shame. His children, too, essentially lose their father and his wife her husband; the conflict between love and honor, between personal desire and patriotic duty, has left everyone a little more alone.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-42

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

Her father embarked ...
... journey into history

"Kamikaze" starts by launching straight into its story. The poem focuses on a Japanese fighter pilot. The pilot was on a kamikaze mission—which meant he was supposed to fly his plane directly into his target, thereby causing maximum damage and killing himself in the process. This poem imagines the moment that he changed his mind—how he longed to stay alive, and the subsequent fall-out of that decision.

His tale is told by his daughter, who starts off as a character in the poem, but at several points seems to be identical with the poem's speaker. The poem can also be interpreted as a story the daughter told to the poem's unidentified speaker, who now retells that story to the reader. Before even looking at the specifics of the story, then, the pilot is already a distanced figure—foreshadowing the way that he will be disowned by his family for acting dishonorably.

So, to the story itself. The pilot departs on his mission at sunrise, packing light because, of course, he isn't supposed to come back:

> Her father embarked at sunrise
> with a flask of water, a samurai sword
> in the cockpit ...

The assonance of various /aw/ and /ah/ sounds here gives the lines a methodical sound that suggests preparation. As yet, the pilot is committed to his mission. The samurai sword—a traditional Japanese weapon—symbolizes the pilot's heroism and honor in (imminent) death. His head is shaven, suggesting a kind of purity brought about by the fact that he is about to die.

The pilot's head is described as "full of powerful incantations." Incantations are like spells or affirmations, the kind of thoughts that the pilot has to keep telling himself to help him actually go through with the kamikaze mission, which goes against his natural survival instinct. This suggests there is an element of faith required. Perhaps the pilot puts this faith in the value of the mission—that it's actually *worth* dying in order to aid his country's war effort.

"Full" in line 4 alliterates with "fuel" in line 5:

> full of powerful incantations
> and enough fuel for a one-way

Both relate to things that the pilot needs for his mission (actual fuel and the metaphorical fuel of motivation and commitment). Here, the poem presents the pilot's journey in metaphorical terms. He is flying "into history," both because he is wrapped in historical events of epic proportion (WWII) *and* because he is literally about to become part of the past tense—he is about to become history himself. Additionally, every line in this stanza is enjambed, suggesting the continuity of a journey and also, perhaps, the pilot's restless state of mind.

LINES 7-12

but half way ...
... green-blue translucent sea

The second stanza marks the key shift in the pilot's literal and metaphorical journey. It begins with the conjunction word "but," which is sudden and abrupt, mirroring the pilot's mid-air change of heart:

> but half way there, she thought,
> recounting it later to her children,
> he must have looked far down

This stanza also helps add layers of distance to the pilot's story—his daughter is talking about it to her children (his grandchildren) some time "later." The phrase, "she thought," after the caesura in line 7, signals that the poem is not just about the kamikaze pilot's story, but also the way that his daughter now reflects on that story.

Essentially, the pilot looks down on a beautiful scene that reminds him of nothing less than life itself—in all its glory and variety. He sees fishing boats from high above, taking a bird's-eye view of life. Faced with death, the pilot considers what it means to live—and to give all that up. The delicate language in lines 10-12 gives the reader a subtle sense of the visual beauty of what the plot can see:

> at the little fishing boats
> strung out like bunting
> on a green-blue translucent sea

These lines are full of assonance, consonance, and even alliteration (in "boats" and "bunting"). The precision of the language captures the clarity with which the pilot suddenly sees the choice before him, while also emphasizing the aesthetic prettiness of the scene.

As with the first stanza, enjambment here gives the poem a sense of flow, of being on a journey (and a fast one at that). But the lack of punctuation suggests mental and visual clarity, the lines uncluttered by commas or full-stops—anticipating how the choice of life over death becomes clear and obvious for the pilot.

LINES 13-18

and beneath them, ...
... towards the sun

The third stanza picks up on the image presented in the second stanza—the pilot's view of the sea below—and develops it further. Not only does the pilot see the fishing boats, but he can actually view entire "shoals" of fish as they move through the water—the kind of detail only noticeable from such great height. They look almost like one singular organism, moving with a subtle intelligence that suggests the rich variety and complexity of nature and, indeed, life itself.

Through simile, the poem compares the visual effect of the "dark shoals of fishes" to a "huge flag" being waved "in a figure of eight." Two things are interesting about this comparison. First of all, the mention of the flag relates to the way that the pilot is weighing his allegiance to his family (and to life) against his allegiance to his country (and to death). Flags, of course, are an important part of nationhood. The" figure of eight" is more open to interpretation, and may not have symbolic meaning at all. However, it could be thought of as a subtle hint at the finality of death (the figure of eight is the symbol for infinity).

As with the previous stanza, the language here is vibrant and visual:

> the dark shoals of fishes
> flashing silver as their bellies
> swivelled towards the sun

Consonance and alliteration—through /sh/, /v/, /f/, /s/, and /l/ sounds—seem to sparkle throughout these lines, bringing the image of the shiny fish to life. The motion of swiveling also reflects on the predicament faced by the pilot—in other words, whether he should stay the course and fulfill his kamikaze mission or turn (swivel) back towards home.

LINES 19-24

and remembered how ...
... father's boat safe

Line 19—the first line of the fourth stanza—is a key moment in the poem. It demonstrates clearly how what the pilot can see relates to his inner emotional state. The enjambment from stanza to stanza suggests the interconnectedness of this thought process, how the pilot's visual information triggers a memory. It also represents the particular way in which the pilot's daughter is reconstructing this story. The high vantage point over the sea—which is also a particular perspective on life itself—makes the pilot think about his childhood. The sea below him brings back significant memories of the sea in his past.

This memory specifically relates to family and, put simply, happiness. It was a happier, purer, and more peaceful time—when the pilot's main concern was not with sacrificing himself in war but in seeing who could build the biggest pile of stones. He and his brothers would see which pile would hold out in the waves caused by their father's returning boat. It's an incredibly intimate image, which highlights the importance of familial love.

The image of "the turbulent inrush of breakers / bringing their father's boat safe" also foreshadows the pilot's own safe return home. The pilot considers the choice in front of him—to die, or to go back to his home and family.

This stanza uses enjambment on every line. As with elsewhere in the poem, this suggests the continuous flight of the pilot, the lines moving in one straight direction like the plane. But it also suggests a kind of mental immersion—not in the mission, but rather in this evocative memory of childhood. And, similarly to the previous stanza, the use of sound patterning makes the memory vivid and clear for the reader—through the alliteration of "pearl-grey pebbles," or the wave-like turbulence of "brothers," "built," "breakers," "bringing," and "boat."

LINES 25-30

– yes, grandfather's ...
... prince, muscular, dangerous.

The fifth stanza starts with a caesura. This marks a point in which the pilot's daughter makes an interjection into her own story—clarifying that her father's father's boat was "yes, [her] grandfather's boat." Though the reader already has enough information to know this, the way she makes special mention of it is significant. She interrupts herself to underline the importance of family and lineage to the story that she is telling, drawing a link between herself, her father, and grandfather. And it was for these familial ties that the pilot decided to turn back in the first place. This first line also repeats a word from the previous line—"safe." Though this is talking specifically about the grandfather's fishing boat, the concept of safety—of being back ashore—is also part of the pilot's change of heart.

The rest of the stanza deals exclusively with the kind of creatures that the grandfather would bring back. Consonance and alliteration in line 26 create an atmosphere of the seas ("shore, salt-sodden, awash") before a typical catch is listed in beautiful, evocative detail:

> with cloud-marked mackerel,
> black crabs, feathery prawns,
> the loose silver of whitebait and once
> a tuna, the dark prince, muscular, dangerous.

It's worth considering the poet's choice to spend a whole stanza on these different creatures of the sea—Garland could easily have summed this all up with a word or two. But something about the attention to detail—and the beauty of the sound patterning—helps convey the importance of this memory. The different creatures also suggest the variety of life and the beauty of the natural world. All of this helps build a case supporting the pilot's eventual decision to turn back.

It's also interesting to note the way that the tuna is given more prominence than the other sea creatures. It's clear that this powerful fish had an almost mystical power to the childhood pilot. It is described metaphorically as "the dark prince, muscular, dangerous." This powerful image of royalty combined reinforces the way the pilot's dilemma is strongly linked to ideas of heroism and honor.

LINES 31-36

And though he ...
... chattered and laughed

Line 31, the start of stanza 6, marks the major turn in the poem, switching from the focus on the pilot's flight to what happened after he returned home. Essentially, he becomes an outcast. His wife ("my mother") never speaks to him again—nor even seems willing to look at him. The same is true of the neighbors, who also express their deep disappointment in the pilot by acting as if he no longer exists. Indeed, as the poem's final line expresses, the pilot has in a way chosen a slow, subtle death in place of the more heroic and explosive kamikaze suicide.

Contrast the vibrancy of the language in the previous stanza with the stark coldness in this one. The stanza uses enjambment and caesura, but it doesn't really aim to create a vivid picture in the reader's mind, especially compared with the evocative list of sea creatures that came just before.

The enjambment and caesura do have an effect, though. They combine with asyndeton—the lack of conjunction words like "and"—to compress the poem's sense of time. Whereas the previous stanzas focus on a short period of time, lingering on the moments that lead to the pilot's change of heart, the final stanzas cover years, or even decades. Ultimately, the pilot turns back because of love of his family—and it's this turning back that prevents them from reciprocating that love.

There is one notable instance of sound patterning in the stanza, which comes in line 36:

> only we children still chattered and laughed

This alliteration is a brief moment of playfulness in an otherwise somber stanza. It fits with the mention of children in contrast to the adults in the pilot's life. Essentially, the children haven't yet learned the social codes of honor and shame, and so don't feel the same need to separate themselves from their father.

LINES 37-42

till gradually we ...
... way to die.

The final stanza continues on from the one before using enjambment. This joins up two moments in time—when the children still "chattered and laughed" with the pilot, and when they "learned" (from the adults) that they shouldn't. As with the previous stanza, this one is in stark contrast to the first five stanzas in terms of its tone and sound. It's much more muted, even sounding a little bit like an elegy. There is some alliteration and consonance between lines 37 to 39—"till," "too," "to," "returned," "that"—but it's barely noticeable. Perhaps this is a way of the poem reflecting the pilot's shame—or, more specifically, the way that people see him as deserving of shame. The quietness of the /t/ sound reflects a kind of turning away from the world.

Asyndeton—the lack of conjunction words like "and"—helps conjure a sense of an ongoing period of time. In this stanza and the previous, the speaker is actually focusing on a number of years—decades, even—and the lack of words like "and" has the effect of bringing all this time together into one place.

The last two lines, however, do form their own sentence—meaning that the preceding sentence ran all the way from line 31 to line 40, all of stanza six and most of stanza seven. This lends the poem's ending dramatic weight, and a kind of wistful melancholy. These lines quietly reframe the pilot's mid-air dilemma—he wasn't choosing between whether to live or die, but between *two different ways* to die. The kamikaze mission would have been a quick death, going out in a blaze of glory. Instead, the pilot suffered a much slower death in the sense that, without the love of his family, his main reason for being alive was taken away from him.

Note how the poem ends on the word "die," giving it a dramatic sense of finality. This also makes sense in relation to the way that the poem is framed—as a story told by the pilot's daughter many years later, then *retold* by an unknown speaker to the reader. This creates a distance between the pilot and his story, and makes the poem end on a note of resignation and sadness. This is especially so, given that the daughter seems to have come to empathize with her father—whereas she had previously followed the other adults in ignoring him.

SYMBOLS

THE SAMURAI SWORD

The samurai sword symbolizes the complex cultural expectations surrounding kamikaze pilots. Samurais were legendary Japanese warriors that existed from the 12th century till the late 1800s. They are world-renowned as figures of bravery and complex military social codes. Samurais

practiced *bushido*, which translates as "the way of the warrior." The key principles of this "way" were righteousness, courage, compassion, respect, honesty, honor, duty/loyalty, and self-control. It's easy to see how these ideas come into play in the figure of the kamikaze pilot, particularly the last two. The pilot is supposed to exercise self-control over his desire to stay alive out of duty to his country. The presence of the samurai sword in the cockpit, then, is a physical reminder of the values that he is supposed to embody.

The mention of the samurai *sword* in particular also might make the reader think of seppuku, a form of ceremonial suicide practiced by samurai. Seppuku could be employed as a means for disgraced soldiers to regain their honor, as well as to avoid capture (it was in fact practiced as late as WWII, when some Japanese military leaders committed seppuku following the nation's defeat). Overall, the samurai sword thus reflects long-standing cultural associations between honor and death.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "a samurai sword"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is used sparingly throughout "Kamikaze."

An early example is in lines 4 and 5:

> full of powerful incantations
> and enough fuel for a one-way

The two /f/ sounds here both relate to things that the pilot needs with him for his mission: fuel and conviction (a head "full of powerful incantations"). Both words are also echoed in "powerful." The incantations—kind of like spells or affirmations—are meant to provide the pilot with the metaphorical fuel of the mind that will allow him to follow through with his suicide mission.

There is also some subtle alliteration in the following stanza. Though the words are on different lines, the shortness of these lines means that the /b/ sounds in this stanza chime together ("boats," "bunting," "green-blue"). "Strung" and "Sea" also ring out alliteratively, and the effect of all of these sounds is to give the stanza a kind of sonic sparkle to match with the visual beauty of what the pilot can see from his plane.

The sounds in the following stanza achieve a similar effect, with alliteration used in line 17 and 18, the end of stanza 3:

> flashing silver as their bellies
> swivelled towards the sun

Again, this seems to brighten up the line, matching the poem's sound to the pilot's view.

Stanza four is full of alliteration. Line 21 uses /p/ sounds in "pearl-grey pebbles," which evoke the stacks of stones that the pilot and his brothers used to make. Later in the stanza, /b/ sounds convey the pilot's memory of his father's boat disrupting the water—causing "breakers" (which alliterates with "bringing" and "boat").

Though there is some alliteration in the last stanza, the final key instance is in line 36, the last line of stanza six. This stanza talks about the way that the pilot was disowned by his family because of the shame he brought on them by not completing his kamikaze mission. Accordingly, it is generally somber and sober in tone, contrasting with the vivid and lively language earlier in the poem. But there is one example of alliteration that stands out tonally, line 36: "only we children still chattered and laughed." There is a playful sound to this loud and clear alliteration, relating to the way that the children—unlike the adults—don't really care for the system of shame and honor that makes the pilot's life miserable. Unfortunately, as the next few lines reveal, they *do* learn "to be silent" and ignore his love.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "samurai sword"
- **Line 4:** "full"
- **Line 5:** "fuel"
- **Line 6:** "history"
- **Line 7:** "half," "there," "thought"
- **Line 8:** "later"
- **Line 9:** "looked," "far"
- **Line 10:** "fishing," "boats"
- **Line 11:** "strung," "bunting"
- **Line 12:** "blue," "sea"
- **Line 13:** "beneath"
- **Line 14:** "flag," "first"
- **Line 15:** "figure"
- **Line 16:** "fishes"
- **Line 17:** "flashing silver"
- **Line 18:** "swivelled," "sun"
- **Line 20:** "brothers"
- **Line 21:** "built," "pearl-grey pebbles"
- **Line 23:** "breakers"
- **Line 24:** "bringing," "boat"
- **Line 25:** "boat," "safe"
- **Line 26:** "salt-sodden"
- **Line 27:** "cloud-marked"
- **Line 28:** "crabs," "prawns"
- **Line 29:** "whitebait," "once"
- **Line 30:** "prince"
- **Line 32:** "mother"
- **Line 33:** "meet"
- **Line 36:** "children," "chattered"

- **Line 37:** "learned"
- **Line 38:** "live"
- **Line 39:** "he had," "that this"
- **Line 40:** "longer," "loved"
- **Line 41:** "sometimes," "said," "wondered"
- **Line 42:** "which," "been," "better," "way"

ASSONANCE

Assonance is used here and there throughout "Kamikaze." For example, take lines 10-12:

> at the little fishing boats
> strung out like bunting
> on a green-blue translucent sea

The assonance here has the effect of giving the lines a kind of sonic sparkle to match with the clarity and beauty of the visual image. There is also a delicateness to the sound that helps convey the way everything appears so small from the pilot's vantage point.

In lines 23 and 24 in the fourth stanza, /ay/ assonance gently suggests the rhythms of the waves caused by the movement of a boat:

> the turbulent inrush of breakers
> bringing their father's boat safe

The assonance acts almost like a slant rhyme, creating a wafting feeling of wholeness, mirroring the safety the boys feel as they look out at the "turbulent" see.

The fifth stanza also uses assonance in its beautiful detailing of the kinds of sea creatures that the pilot's father would catch on his boating expeditions:

> [...] salt-sodden, awash
> with cloud-marked mackerel,
> black crabs

The short /o/ and /a/ vowel sounds capture the briny feel of the sea imagery.

The final two stanzas deliberately tone down the poem's sound patterning, so the assonance isn't as noticeable. This section is more somber in tone because it looks specifically at the years that followed the pilot's decision to turn back—during which he was disowned by his family. That said, there are few subtle instances in which assonance is put to use. For instance:

> till gradually we too learned
> to be silent, to live as though
> he had never returned

The quiet but insistent repetition of the /ee/ and /oo/ sounds capture how the children are eventually taught to ostracize their father: through the quiet insistence of the adults around them.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "father embarked," "sunrise"
- **Line 2:** "water," "samurai"
- **Line 3:** "cockpit," "shaven"
- **Line 4:** "full," "powerful incantations"
- **Line 5:** "enough," "one-way"
- **Line 6:** "journey," "history"
- **Line 7:** "way"
- **Line 8:** "later"
- **Line 10:** "little fishing"
- **Line 11:** "strung," "bunting"
- **Lines 12-12:** "green- / translucent sea"
- **Line 12:** "blue"
- **Line 13:** "beneath," " arcing," "swathes"
- **Line 14:** "waved," "way"
- **Line 15:** "eight"
- **Line 16:** "fishes"
- **Line 17:** "flashing silver as"
- **Line 18:** "swivelled"
- **Line 20:** "waiting"
- **Line 21:** "grey"
- **Line 23:** "breakers"
- **Line 24:** "safe"
- **Line 26:** "salt-sodden, awash"
- **Line 27:** "cloud-marked mackerel"
- **Line 28:** "black crabs"
- **Line 29:** "loose," "once"
- **Line 30:** "a tuna, the," "muscular"
- **Line 33:** "she meet"
- **Line 34:** "neighbours," "they treated him"
- **Line 35:** "though," "no," "existed"
- **Line 36:** "only," "children still chattered and laughed"
- **Line 37:** "till gradually we too"
- **Line 38:** "to be," "to"
- **Line 39:** "he"
- **Line 40:** "longer," "father," "loved"
- **Line 41:** "sometimes," "must," "wondered"
- **Line 42:** "die"

ASYNDETON

"Kamikaze" is a poem that unfolds almost without stopping, using enjambment and caesura throughout to create momentum. Indeed, the first full-stop comes in the fifth stanza, a full thirty lines into the poem. The poem is effectively broken in two, with the first five stanzas dealing with the pilot's journey, and the final two stanzas dealing with the aftermath when he decides to turn back. Asyndeton (the absence of conjunctions such as "and") is an important part of both

sections, contributing to the initial sense of speed and momentum before also helping the final two stanzas compress time (there is the sense of decades going by in the last twelve lines).

The main example of asyndeton in the first section occurs in the fifth stanza (prior to that, the quick flow of the poem is mainly achieved through enjambment), particularly in lines 26 to 30:

> to the shore, salt-sodden, awash
> with cloud-marked mackerel,
> black crabs, feathery prawns,
> the loose silver of whitebait and once
> a tuna, the dark prince, muscular, dangerous.

The poem spends a whole stanza listing out the kinds of things that the pilot's father would catch in his fishing boat. This emphasizes the importance, clarity, and impact of those childhood memories on the pilot's psyche. The asyndeton here suggests abundance and variety—and the sea being so full of life seems to form part of the pilot's decision to choose life over death. And in the speaker's description of the tuna, asyndeton helps make the fish seem mysterious and powerful.

The use of asyndenton in the final two stanzas shows its versatility as a device. Here, years—decades, even—are compressed into a few short lines. This helps build a sense of the unrelenting sadness of these years, the time in which the pilot suffered a different kind of death—the rejection of his family. Given that it was for his family that he decided to turn back, this is especially tragic. Asyndeton creates the impression of time pulsing by, which then contrasts with the last two lines, in which the daughter slows down to reflect on everything that happened. The contrast gives the last two lines extra dramatic and heartbreaking weight.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 25-30:** "– yes, grandfather's boat – safe / to the shore, salt-sodden, awash / with cloud-marked mackerel, / black crabs, feathery prawns, / the loose silver of whitebait and once / a tuna, the dark prince, muscular, dangerous."
- **Lines 34-40:** "and the neighbours too, they treated him / as though he no longer existed, / only we children still chattered and laughed / till gradually we too learned / to be silent, to live as though / he had never returned, that this / was no longer the father we loved."

CAESURA

Caesura is used in every stanza of "Kamikaze" except for the fourth. Generally speaking, caesura is an important part of the poem's tone. There are hardly any full stops in the poem, with the speaker instead opting mostly for long, continuous sentences that unfold clause by clause—with comma caesurae making a key contribution. This gives the initial part of the poem—which describes the pilot's flight and state of mind—a sense of forward momentum, while also adding a slightly tentative sound too (reflecting the pilot's indecision about his kamikaze suicide mission).

The caesurae are also used to create interjections by the speaker—the pilot's daughter (though the speaker is *also* the unnamed narrator who is reporting what the daughter says). In line 25, for example, the caesura allows for the speaker to clarify that the pilot's father's boat was her grandfather's boat (because they're the same person): "– yes, grandfather's boat – safe." This isn't a pointless statement; it helps draw a link between the different family members and emphasize the importance of familial love and connection as a theme in the poem.

In the fifth stanza, caesura achieves two key effects. Firstly, the numerous commas break the lines up and give them a wave-like quality (which fits with the focus on sea). Secondly, the caesurae also help get across the numerousness and variety of sea creatures that would turn up in the pilot's fishing catch—the list feels almost limitless!

In the sixth and seventh stanzas—which discuss how the pilot's family disowned him after he chose not to complete his kamikaze mission—the caesurae take on a different quality. The tone of the language is more somber here, and the caesurae help the poem end on a reflective and melancholic note.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "water, a"
- **Line 3:** "cockpit, a"
- **Line 7:** "there, she"
- **Line 13:** "them, arcing"
- **Line 25:** "– yes, grandfather's boat – safe"
- **Line 26:** "shore, salt-sodden, awash"
- **Line 28:** "crabs, feathery"
- **Line 30:** "tuna, the," "prince, muscular, dangerous."
- **Line 33:** "presence, nor"
- **Line 34:** "too, they"
- **Line 38:** "silent, to"
- **Line 39:** "returned, that"
- **Line 41:** "sometimes, she said, he"

CONSONANCE

Consonance is an important part of "Kamikaze" throughout the poem. There is some consonance in the first stanza, but it's in the second stanza that it really comes into play (especially in lines 10-12):

> at the little fishing boats
> strung out like bunting
> on a green-blue translucent sea

The consonants here feel meticulously selected and ring out brightly together. The *sound* of the lines seems to suggest the clarity of the pilot's bird's eye view (and the way that this leads to mental clarity too).

The next stanza uses consonance as well:

> the dark shoals of fishes
> flashing silver as their bellies
> swivelled towards the sun

As with the previous example, there is a precision to the choice of sounds that mirrors the pilot's visual perspective. The /s/ sound here also recurs throughout these lines as sibilance, as though it too flashes with silver.

The fifth stanza is probably the most consonant of them all. Throughout the stanza, an /s/ sound helps evoke the sound of the sea (e.g. "salt-sodden"). But consonance also helps the poem build a vivid visual picture of the kinds of sea creatures that the pilot's father would catch—the hard /c/ sounds of "cloud-marked mackerel" relating to the mackerel's patterned skin, and the /n/ and hard /c/ sound in line 30 making the tuna seem strong and mysterious: "a tuna, the dark prince, muscular, dangerous."

The last two stanzas turn down the volume the poem's consonance—it becomes more subtle. There are some gently chiming /l/ and /s/ sounds, but the tone is much more somber and dark. This fits with the shift that takes place in the poem—turning from the pilot's flight to the consequences of his decision to abort his mission.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Lines 5-6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Lines 11-12
- Line 12
- Line 13
- Line 14
- Line 15
- Line 16
- Line 17
- Line 18
- Line 19
- Line 20
- Line 21
- Line 22
- Line 23
- Line 24
- Line 25
- Line 26
- Lines 27-28
- Line 29
- Line 30
- Line 31
- Line 32
- Line 33
- Line 34
- Line 36
- Line 37
- Line 38
- Line 39
- Line 40
- Line 41
- Line 42

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is used in almost every line of "Kamikaze." In fact, only nine out of forty-two lines have punctuation at the end!

Enjambment, then, is a key part of the poem's form. One of the main functions of this near relentless enjambment is to create a sense of speed and momentum. This is, after all, a poem in part set in the cockpit of a fighter jet—so it makes sense for the lines to fly by thick and fast. This could also be interpreted as a kind of restlessness that reflects the pilot's state of mind.

As the poem delves into the pilot's state of mind, the enjambment seems to reflect the way his thoughts crystallize around one particular childhood memory. The enjambment in lines 10-12 helps give the reader a sense of the light catching on the surface of the sea:

> at the little fishing boats
> strung out like bunting
> on a green-blue translucent sea

And lines 19-24 (the entire fourth stanza), which establish the pilot's recollection of his father's fishing boat, are completely enjambed. This makes the memory clear and strong.

The enjambment in the last two stanzas serves a different function. Here, the poem's tone changes drastically as it switches its focus from the pilot's flight to the fall-out of his decision to turn back. Here, the enjambment works with asyndeton (the lack of conjunction words like "and") to compress decades into a few short phrases—showing how drastically the pilot's life changed as a result of his decision.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** “sunrise / with”
- **Lines 2-3:** “sword / in”
- **Lines 3-4:** “head / full”
- **Lines 4-5:** “incantations / and”
- **Lines 5-6:** “one-way / journey”
- **Lines 6-7:** “history / but”
- **Lines 9-10:** “down / at”
- **Lines 10-11:** “boats / strung”
- **Lines 11-12:** “bunting / on”
- **Lines 12-13:** “sea / and”
- **Lines 13-14:** “swathes / like”
- **Lines 14-15:** “way / then”
- **Lines 16-17:** “fishes / flashing”
- **Lines 17-18:** “ bellies / swivelled”
- **Lines 18-19:** “sun / and”
- **Lines 19-20:** “he / and”
- **Lines 20-21:** “shore / built”
- **Lines 21-22:** “pebbles / to”
- **Lines 22-23:** “longest / the”
- **Lines 23-24:** “breakers / bringing”
- **Lines 25-26:** “safe / to”
- **Lines 26-27:** “awash / with”
- **Lines 29-30:** “once / a”
- **Lines 31-32:** “back / my”
- **Lines 32-33:** “again / in”
- **Lines 33-34:** “eyes / and”
- **Lines 34-35:** “him / as”
- **Lines 36-37:** “laughed / till”
- **Lines 37-38:** “learned / to”
- **Lines 38-39:** “though / he”
- **Lines 39-40:** “this / was”
- **Lines 41-42:** “wondered / which”

METAPHOR

"Kamikaze" is a narrative poem that doesn't rely much on metaphor, instead mostly focusing on detailed visual description. That said, there are a couple of examples of metaphors at key moments in the poem. The first metaphor is in the first stanza. Here, the kamikaze pilot is described as having:

> [...] a shaven head
> full of powerful incantations
> and enough fuel for a one-way
> journey into history

History, of course, is not something concrete which someone can "journey into." Instead, it is a metaphorical description of the pilot's task. His kamikaze flight is part of the war effort during WWII, and his suicide *would be* a small part of one of the most significant periods in human history. But history, of course, also specifically means the past. So the metaphor also describes the way that, through dying, the pilot would enter the past-tense—no longer alive in the present.

The other metaphors come in the fifth stanza. "Cloud-marked mackerel" is just a vivid way to describe the fish's appearance, and so is "feathery prawns," while describing the tuna fish as "the dark prince" helps get across the way that tuna seemed so powerful and mysterious to the pilot when he was a child. The mention of a prince also relates to the way that the pilot's choice between life and death is tied up with questions of honor, nobility, and shame.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** “a one-way / journey into history”
- **Line 27:** “cloud-marked mackerel,”
- **Line 28:** “feathery prawns”
- **Line 30:** “a tuna, the dark prince,”

SIMILE

"Kamikaze" doesn't use much figurative language, instead mostly focusing on detailed visual description. There are, however, several examples of simile.

The first of these comes in the second stanza, during the discussion of the pilot's mid-air change of heart:

> he must have looked far down
> at the little fishing boats
> strung out like bunting
> on a green-blue translucent sea

This simile compares fishing boats to bunting, which is a kind of decoration made with strings of triangular flags. From way up high, then, the boats take on the appearance of much smaller objects. It's worth thinking, too, about when and why people put up bunting. It tends to be used during celebrations—like weddings, for example. The bunting image gently suggests something life-affirming, then, forming part of the pilot's decision to turn back from his mission—to choose life over death.

The other simile comes in the following stanza:

> [...] arcing in swathes
> like a huge flag waved first one way
> then the other in a figure of eight,
> the dark shoals of fishes
> flashing silver as their bellies
> swivelled towards the sun

This simile compares the shoals of fishes—which the pilot can see in their entirety—to flags being waved in "a figure of eight." This is an interesting simile for two reasons. Firstly, the mention of a flag relates to ideas of nationalism and patriotism.

It's for these that the pilot is supposed to die—to honor his commitment to his country, Japan. The figure-eight shape perhaps also hints at infinity (which is represented by a sideways figure of eight technically known as a lemniscate). This connects to the infinite void that the pilot stares in the face as he flies—death.

There are two more, closely related similes that occur. In the penultimate stanza, the speaker says:

> and the neighbours too, they treated him
> as though he no longer existed

And then in the final stanza, the speaker says:

> [...] gradually we too learned
> to be silent, to live as though
> he had never returned

In both these cases, the speaker uses simile to capture the way that her father is socially ostracized. Everyone acts as if he isn't there, even though he is. This becomes a kind of death—even though the father chose life over suicide, it's *as if* he is dead to everyone.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-12:** "the little fishing boats / strung out like bunting / on a green-blue translucent sea"
- **Lines 13-18:** "arcing in swathes / like a huge flag waved first one way / then the other in a figure of eight, / the dark shoals of fishes / flashing silver as their bellies / swivelled towards the sun"
- **Lines 34-35:** "they treated him / as though he no longer existed"
- **Lines 38-39:** "to live as though / he had never returned"

IRONY

The irony of the poem lies in the fact that the pilot abandons his mission in order to return to his family, only to then be shunned by that family for abandoning his mission. The pilot effectively brings about exactly what he does not want to happen; in trying to be with his family, he pushes his family away.

This irony, the poem implies, is a result of the conflict between personal desire and patriotic duty. And to understand why the pilot is rejected by his wife, neighbors, and eventually even by his children, it's necessary to understand the importance of honor in Japanese culture.

Generally speaking, honor (as well as ideas surrounding duty and collective obligation) has historically played an important role in Japanese life. For example, as noted in this guide's discussion of the samurai sword symbol, samurai lived by codes of honor collectively referred to as *bushido*. This basically translates to "the way of the warrior," and encouraged traits such as humility, self-restraint, courage, and loyalty.

Part of the supposed allure of being a kamikaze pilot in World War II was also tied to notions of honor. Dying for one's country was considered noble—so noble, in fact, that it would bring honor to a pilot's whole family. (Do note, however, that there is certainly debate around the *actual* motivations felt by kamikaze "volunteers," some of whom may have been corralled into service via peer pressure and coercion, rather than spurred on by cultural notions of honor. As with any broad statements about cultural beliefs, things are often more complicated than they appear!) As such, though the pilot—to some Western readers, at least—might seem to be doing a noble thing in abandoning his mission in order to spend more time with his loved ones, this constitutes a patriotic betrayal. His desire to be with his family reflects his privileging of his personal wants over the demands of his country—sacrificing his national honor for his personal desires.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- Lines 19-30
- Lines 31-42

VOCABULARY

Samurai Sword (Line 2) - The sword used by a samurai warrior, a legendary Japanese soldier with a strict code of honor and self-discipline.

Incantations (Line 4) - Like spells or affirmations. Indeed, kamikaze pilot training was in part based on spiritual rigor, and monk-like repetition of certain key principles was part of this.

Bunting (Line 11) - Bunting is a decoration made out of small flag-like shapes.

Shoals (Line 16) - Large groups of fish.

Cairns (Line 21) - Piles of stones.

Turbulent Inrush (Line 23) - The movement of the waves caused by the fishing boat.

Breakers (Line 23) - Strong waves (perhaps an exaggeration in the speaker's childhood memory).

Salt-Sodden (Line 26) - Drenched in salt.

Whitebait (Line 29) - A small white fish.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Kamikaze" uses sestets—six-line stanzas—from start to finish. Additionally, it's a narrative that can be divided into distinct

sections: the first five stanzas and the last two. In the first section, the speaker (the kamikaze pilot's daughter) recounts the story of her father's mission—and how he must have come to change his mind about committing suicide to aid his country's war effort. Within the first section, the poem moves linearly—like a journey. It starts with the pilot's departure, before shifting to his view of the sea. It's this view that triggers a childhood memory, which is discussed in vivid detail in the fourth and fifth stanzas.

After these five stanzas, the last two deal specifically with the fallout when he turns back. These two stanzas compress decades of time into a few short phrases, outlining the way that the pilot's mid-air choice was a false one. That is, he thought he was choosing between life and death, and chose the former because of his instinctive love for family and life's beauty. In reality, his choice was between two different deaths—as the last two lines state so somberly.

METER

"Kamikaze" is written in free verse, and accordingly doesn't use a strict metrical scheme. This helps facilitate the way that the poem unfolds. The first five stanzas feel particularly fast, as though to mirror the intense speed of a fighter jet—and the pilot's troubled state of mind.

Interestingly, the poem does slip into the sound of regular meter right at the end. Here are the last line and a half without the line break:

> he must | have wond- | ered which | had been | the bet- | ter way | to die.

The ending, then, unfolds with the steady sound of iambs (though it could easily go unnoticed given the lack of meter prior to this point). This gives the poem's conclusion a kind of resigned, melancholic sound, which certainly fits with what is actually being said. That is, the stateliness of this section has a kind of inevitable march to its sound—mirroring the way that everything that is being discussed is in the past, and there's nothing more that can be done about it.

RHYME SCHEME

There is no rhyme scheme in "Kamikaze." The lack of rhyme fits with the poem's subject matter. The first section of the poem (the first five stanzas) uses the quickness of free verse and enjambment to convey both the fact that the pilot's decision takes place in a fighter jet mid-flight *and* the busy mind of the pilot as he comes to that decision.

That said, the poem does use assonance and consonance here and there in a manner similar to slant rhyme. These moments are relatively quiet, and happen about once per stanza.

In the first stanza, there is a subtle resonance between lines 4 and 5:

> full of powerful incantations
> and enough fuel for a one-way

The next instance is in stanza three, lines 14 and 15:

> like a huge flag waved first one way
> then the other in a figure of eight,

Similarly in the next stanza, lines 23-25:

> the turbulent inrush of breakers
> bringing their father's boat safe
> – yes, grandfather's boat – safe

Likewise lines 28-29 in the following stanza:

> black crabs, feathery prawns,
> the loose silver of whitebait and once

And in the following stanza:

> and the neighbours too, they treated him
> as though he no longer existed

In the final stanza:

> was no longer the father we loved.
> And sometimes, she said, he must have wondered

These resonances between lines add to the poem's tumbling quality, so that the lines feel connected without ever pausing.

SPEAKER

The identity of the speaker is an interesting question in "Kamikaze." In a way, there are two. The whole poem is reported speech that belongs to the daughter of the kamikaze pilot in question. She is the "Her" that begins the poem. Her father's story is told many years later—perhaps even when she herself is an old woman. She certainly seems to empathize with her father now—though, as the final stanza outlines, there was a time when she learned not to.

Indeed, the poem is in part the daughter's effort to place herself in her father's position, and to try and get a sense of what it was like for him to confront the choice between life and death. Telling the story from her perspective allows the poem to underline the importance of family as a theme, with the speaker variously referring to her father, grandfather, mother, siblings, and neighbors.

But it's also true to say that, because this is reported speech, the daughter is *not* the actual speaker—or not always, anyway.

The poem waffles between a third-person and a first-person perspective. The first-person moments seem to be the daughter speaking, while in the third-person the speaker becomes a removed narrator *recounting* what the daughter says.

There's no reason to treat this speech as unreliable, but it's worth acknowledging how this frame places one more stage of distance between the reader and the pilot. The pilot, of course, has no voice in this poem—he is long gone. The reader has to try to imagine what it was like for him through the prism of his daughter *and* the narrator, and this distance seems to have the purpose of foregrounding how difficult it actually is to know what it was like to face the pilot's dilemma.

SETTING

On a very literal level, the poem takes place in Japan. More broadly, though, the poem is primarily set in the memory or imagination of the speaker, the pilot's daughter. Her account of her father's aborted kamikaze mission is detailed and well thought-out, suggesting that it is perhaps based in part on his own account. *Within* this construction of imagination and memory, the poem has three main settings.

The first of these is in the cockpit itself. The reader is put in the literal driving seat, and asked to imagine what it was like for the pilot, wrapped up in the animosities of World War II, to be tasked with flying his plane directly into an enemy warship. This allows the poem to consider the pilot's view, and how that would have informed his decision to turn back.

Indeed, it is because of this bird's-eye perspective that the poem moves into the second stage of its setting—the pilot's memory (which, it must be stressed, is told through the daughter's words, which are in turn reported to the reader by the poem itself). This memory is vivid and beautiful, detailing the pilot's childhood spent playing on the shore, waiting for his father to bring back that day's fishing haul. It's the vibrancy and warmth of this memory that makes the pilot turn back (as far as the reader can tell anyway).

Finally, the poem moves into its third setting—the years that followed the pilot's decision to turn back. The last two stanzas outline how his family practically disowned him because of his dishonorable actions. These stanzas give a sense of time passing, and how, during that time, the emotional distance between the pilot and his family never resolved.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Beatrice Garland is a British poet. The poem, of course, is far removed from Garland's own immediate experience, and focuses on the plight of a Japanese kamikaze pilot during World War II. In terms of her own work, this is not unusual. Much of her writing similarly represents a kind of throwing of the voice, an attempt to imagine the world from someone else's perspective. In her own words, "I spend a lot of the day listening to other people's worlds."

It's worth comparing this poem with her other poems "A Private Life" and "A Kosovan Ghost Story," which similarly try to inhabit somebody else's voice. This particular approach is, of course, nothing new. But perhaps it is more hotly debated now than ever before. To what degree poets can write from other perspectives? How different can these perspectives be from the writer's own experience before such writing becomes irresponsible or insensitive? These questions form an important part of the discourses of contemporary poetry.

With its focus on the events of World War II, this poem should also be considered within the wider context of war poetry. War poets can, broadly speaking, be divided into those with direct experience—writers like Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves from WWI, or Keith Douglas and Anthony Hecht in World War Two—and those who weren't part of the actual conflict. Garland, of course, falls into the latter category, and it's worth comparing her poem with Owen Sheers's "Mametz Wood" and Ted Hughes's "Bayonet Charge" (indeed, this latter poem also looks directly at a soldier on his way into battle).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

There are two key aspects to the historical context of "Kamikaze." The first of these is the general history of World War II. This was the second horrendous conflict that humankind inflicted on itself during the 20th century. Around four times as many people died in WWII compared to WWI—approximately 70 million.

The lead-up to WWII was long and complex, but put simplistically, it was based on the desire of Adolf Hitler to reinstate Germany's might following the harsh sanctions and limitations imposed on the country after WWI. After Germany invaded Poland in late 1939, Britain declared war on Germany and other countries followed suit. Japan was drawn into the conflict in 1940, when the country signed a pact with Nazi Germany. Emperor Hirohito consented to his government's decision to attack the Americans, soon resulting in the Pearl Harbor raid in December 1941. Japan subsequently occupied a number of territories in that part of the world, including Singapore and the Philippines. The war officially ended on September 2nd, 1945, with the surrender of Japan following the American's use of the atomic bomb.

The other main aspect to consider here is Japanese culture more widely. The kamikaze pilots' task—to fly direct into the enemy target—was built on social and military codes of honor and self-sacrifice. These had a lot to do with the samurai warrior tradition, as the presence of the "samurai sword / in the

cockpit" suggests. Honor and shame are, generally speaking, important parts of Japanese culture. Indeed, they are so integral that the pilot's disgrace seems to disgrace those in his immediate circle as well, and is ultimately why they disown him.

Garland also draws a link between the kamikaze pilots and other suicide bombers:

> They were of course the precursors of today's suicide bombers, prepared to die for what they believed in. But there have been individuals willing to do that throughout history, even though we tend to think of it as a modern phenomenon. The young men driving lorries into crowds are virtually identical, with rather less technology at their disposal: they know they will die at the end of it.

Thus, her poem can be seen as an attempt to use history (kamikaze pilots) to understand our current moment as well, in which suicide bombers have become a pervasive threat.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- World War II Poetry — A valuable critical overview of WWII poets by the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/91359/the-poetry-of-wwii)
- Garland's Perspective — Garland discusses the poem in this short interview. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p-Tl6mkBLTs)
- Interview with Kamikaze Pilots — Garland's poem was in part inspired by this article, an interview with two kamikaze pilots. (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/11/the-last-kamikaze-two-japanese-pilots-tell-how-they-cheated-death)
- More Poems by Garland — A link to Garland's own website, which has a number of her poems up for reading. (http://www.beatricegarland.co.uk/poems/)
- Shame and Honor — A fascinating essay that looks into the Japanese attitude towards shame and honor. The essay also focuses on bushido (which originated with the samurai warriors). (https://www.pbs.org/mosthonorableson/shame.html)

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